

Day Dreams



sixteen odd stories

Andreas Gripp

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Also by the same author:

Selected Poems 2000-2020

Candelabra (photographs)

Day Dreams

sixteen odd stories

Andreas Gripp
Beliveau Books

Day Dreams : sixteen odd stories

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**Mrs. Peterson, the boy who stands on the corner
isn't your son**

The April morning, after the Easter long weekend, after all that talk of renewal and resurrection, a Tuesday I think, ten-thirty, is the first (and only) time you said you'd seen him.

The way you described it, it sounded so surreal: around eight years old, arms at his side, stiff and unmoving, hair unkempt, almost Einstein-esque in dishevelment, clothes sooted and ragged, face smudged so that he looked like "Pig Pen" from the *Peanuts* strip.

I mentioned that "Pig Pen" looked just like Charlie Brown but that he was even far worse off. At least Chuck had a bath and parents who saw to it that his clothes were pressed and clean; an easy job, really, considering that he donned the same striped shirt every day. I almost see "Pig Pen" as that which Charlie Brown might someday become – an older version, though, slovenly and drunk, standing on street corners panning for change, bitter and jaded by the cards that life had dealt him.

The way you go on about the boy makes me think that you want to rescue him from his unfortunate circumstance:

“Why is he so dirty?”

“Where are his parents?!”

“Doesn’t anyone even care?!”

Your obsession was starting to show: at first, walking to that corner, Patterson and Pine, at 10:30 AM for eleven days straight. Why did you expect him to be there, standing aimlessly and at that time? It’s usually recess and the boy would be on the grounds behind his school, if he were *in* school, that is, and if not, for what reason should he return to the lamppost you’d described, to stand so tree-like and stiff as a pole?

Since your mornings are free (a part-time job in the evenings at the S-Mart cosmetics department), you took it upon yourself to extend the line of search, up and down Patterson, past Monroe, and then along Pine and around the little bend that was Yale Boulevard (named after the Ivy-League school, no doubt, or the chap for whom the university was christened), which, not-coincidentally, is met by an equally-small street known as “Harvard”; on foot at first, then in your car, the Volkswagen Beetle, the newish version, post-’99, not the original cutie with its engine in the rear.

I wonder if someone began to notice, your VW bug, burgundy, creeping along the streets at a slug-like 3 or 4 mph; your head jerking left and right, and at times, lightning-quick over your shoulder at every glimpse of walking feet.

Did no one witness the time you spotted those sloppy curls, on the kid wearing a muddied jacket? You'd gotten out of your car after nearly ramming it into the curb, calling out "hey!" as the child waddled fifteen feet ahead, finding out only that it was a girl, possibly late for school, her gait definitely boyish for certain, a lesbian of the future, your frustration had convinced you. Or maybe madness encroaching.

I have a hard time believing that no one called the police, that not a single household occupant would have noted the pattern: your car edging along the road, driver searching frantically ...

Of course, had you been a predator, an abductor of children, a sexual deviant of sorts, then you'd have surely conducted your routine during the time that kids were out, say, 8:45 AM, as they marched along the streets and to the schools that they were destined. Your daily time of choosing, 10:30 (plus the fifteen minutes on either side that you spent on your look-out for him), was far from an optimal moment,

not exactly a prime-time for pedophiles; and the fact that you were a woman, middle-aged, roughly 48, worked assuredly in your favour.

A man would have been questioned by now with a background check by the police to make sure there was no history of vile offenses. Perhaps you were merely looking for a pet, faithfully for your cat, yes, who'd run away from your sheltered home, curiosity besting its sense of reason. Or you may have been studying the houses up for sale (in that stretch of town, there are usually quite a few).

No matter, you've escaped any arduous scrutiny and are permitted your continual hunt, for the phantom boy you moan about, the one you wish you would have talked to, after stopping, that morning, a couple of months ago now, when you could have learned his given name, asked if he was hungry, if he'd like some brand new shoes.

"How can a mother let her son walk the streets like that?"

"Maybe he *has* no mother," I reply, sipping orange pekoe as you prepare for your trek again.

Today, you vow, is the day that you'll find him at last. Today is the day in which you can end your eyeballs spinning, telling your boarder (that's me) how painfully close you thought you were.

As you leave, the clock reading ten past ten, I conjure up the scenarios from your past, what it is that makes you this neurotic, obsessive and compulsive:

- A. The most obvious – you lost your son when he was young, possibly to disease or accident, or maybe he suddenly disappeared without a warning or a trace.
- B. You've never had a son and for whatever reason, this boy that you pity fills the void and continual longing.
- C. You were hallucinating that morning, have acquired OCD, and your delusions are keeping you going. I mean, *really*, a straggly boy standing as still as a statue, beside a lamppost, at mid-morning? If he's real, then he's caused your mind to snap, the simple sight of him.

If he's an apparition, some sort of *ghost* as for a minute you'd once considered, then again, it's a sign that your breakdown has reached fruition. And if he was never-ever there, then that is the worst of the three, and I'd better find a tactful way to tell you that your mental state's amok.

My drink is getting cold, the hot one, the tea, something I'm still doing even though it's now mid-June. Cooler drinks will follow as is my custom – all iced with slices of lime.

If I were to run fast enough, I contemplate, I just might be able to find out for myself which is real and which is not; see if today is indeed the day you find him – or think you do, and if I spy from higher hedges, at the street corner you say you saw him, I may see just how much your grip on reality has been lost.

I haven't run for years, save the times I'm sprinting for the bus, waving down the driver in order to make him stop, rogue fellow that he is, having arrived a few minutes early so that he gets a longer donut break.

And so I go: panting far heavier than I should, sounding like an asthmatic Darth Vader, a sign I'm pathetically out of shape. Nine blocks takes a good little while to cover, and it's rather unlikely I'll beat my landlady to Patterson and Pine.

And why do I care? Why does Mrs. Gail Peterson's obsession matter this much to me – and have I become just as equally fixated as a result? Yes, I too am seeing the boy in my mind, taking shape as a slab of Play-doh, awaiting a child's nimble fingers to give it appropriate form. My own eyes are watching as a fuzzy outline takes on clarification, and St. Paul's line about seeing dimly in a mirror, in First Corinthians 13, the passage about love that everyone knows, even the agnostics and atheists alike, calls itself to mind.

A block away from my destination, as the occasional car whirrs by and the odd person strolls on past or walks their pattering, happy dog, I'm again pondering the "why bother?" of it all. I don't know Mrs. Peterson, really, we're not related. I'm just a lowly, unknown writer who's never published a story or a single line of verse. I flip pizza dough at nights, kneading softness with my hands as if it were something to be shaped, in its own divine right, and not a thing to be divvied up by twelve, but it frees up

my days so I can write, and the rent for the room upstairs is ideally inexpensive, and it's quiet, yes, quiet enough for a would-be author such as myself and I do owe it to my landlady to answer for her, once and for all, the question of the young boy's supposed existence and why he stands so stiff-like, by the lamppost, the one I can see now as my run has diminished to a jog, at 10:38 AM, eight minutes late, assuming Mrs. Peterson has already come on by, though expectant of her approaching return.

But time of day doesn't seem to matter, not now, not at the moment I dart across the road and to the lamppost she told me about, the one at the edge of the sidewalk adjacent to a lonely house on the corner – yes, *his* house, the boy's house, I can sense it all inside me, he *did* live at this crumbly old brownstone, bricks matted with grey and age, window frames cracked, faded curtains drawn, weeds abundant, overrunning grass and popping through seams in the driveway without a car; yes I know it all now, he played here with his friend, the one who leaped in front of traffic while the boy stood frozen, beneath this lamppost, the one I'm touching as I turn, as gradually as a minute hand hits its mark, and thus I lower both of *my* hands,

staring out blankly into the street at the cars and bicycles puttering past, the wind beginning to shriek, going from gust to gale, making my hair a disorderly mess, pounding my face with dirt, awaiting the one who'll soon come by and see me for what I am.

With the Mortgage Paid and a Sizeable Inheritance, Why Walk Into the Outside World?

Don't call her Emily, though some in jest, might. Not that there are many who know her or know *of* her existence because there aren't. And it's her own fault, really, not the snobs or cliquish kids who've never tried to make her acquaintance, for what kind of rapport can one develop if the subject refuses to leave the house for even a *solitary* occasion?

Well, you tell me, playing the advocate of devils, there was the time she twisted her ankle in the basement, called up to her mother who promptly drove her to Emergency, where the doctors or medics or whoever they were tended her (not that she would have paid that much attention anyway), bandaged her up and sent her home with some painkillers.

Her mum, wise soul that she was, intuitive perhaps, tossed them out in the catatonia of night, fearful of what her daughter might do if tempted by a bottle of put-me-to-sleep-and-never-awake-again medicine (if used at a deliberately wrong dosage, of course).

I don't think that Chantelle, the one her naysayers refer to as "that Emily girl" (after Miss Dickinson, the reclusive, spinster, 19th-century poet who rarely

left her abode) would have been so bold. From what you tell me of her, she's fearful of afterlife, of the Hells and Purgatories described to her by the Brothers of the Covenant, the eunuchs who reside in the monastery a trio of blocks away, who visited her Religious Studies class in 11th-grade, at Our Lady of Guadeloupe (not *Acapulco* as I'd previously thought; too vacation-esque and deceptively clean for the Virgin to visit). Despite the chance of freedom that death may proffer, she's unlikely to take it, knowing "things can be even worse" if the Catholics are right and she spends forever in torment.

Okay, there was a second time she went to the Hospital, when her mother was away on an errand. She would have waited for her return, but the palm of her hand, singed on the stovetop (clumsy, yes, and inattentive, outside the norm for her but daydreams are the cause of such), demanded swifter-than-patient action, and a taxi cab was called (an ambulance garners much too much attention for the awkward and out-of-sorts who scribble of love in the guise of poetry), the nurses or interns or who-the-bloody-ever that balmed and gauzed her burn far too nosy with their

"What were you doing?"

"Do you live alone?"

"Are you sexually active?"

busybody inquiries leaving her to vow to stay indoors

for decades and avoid the prying, the praying and the preying henceforth.

I hope the aforementioned is sufficient for the background, though I've neglected to mention siblings or a drunken father who guttered to his death when she was five (see how cleverly I've just slipped that in).

There are no siblings.

Chantelle's poetry (there's little else to talk about, other than her regular self-fondling to relieve her constant tension that the loneliness inevitably leaves – and I only guess that's what the sounds from her bedroom are, our homes fairly close together, separated by a narrow, half-dead hedge) is the miserable kind you'd expect from a jaded juvenile, though at 33, we cannot classify her as such.

We have one of her poems in a scrapbook, the text of which reads:

*Sprout four-score hands
and more, my lover,
feel my body stretch to yours,
ribs visible,*

*breasts and thighs
thinned out
from lack of wanton touch.
Wet my lips with yours
and watch my shrivelled garden
grow.*

Not wretched, mind you, and maybe somewhat stronger than what you'd hear in a Junior High English class, but hardly shortlisted-for-the-awards material.

"I'll always think of her as a kid," you inject whenever we discuss her plight. And she'll be that way at 44, 55, 66, and, if she lives that long, at 77, 88 and 99.

"If she dies rather young, she'll be a hell of a lot more famous," one of us predicts, a hypothesis based on history, as writers, painters, singers and actors become bigger-than-the-demigods they aspire to be when hit-by-a-bus, shot-at-gunpoint, crashing their sports cars into trees, or hanging themselves in the murkiest crannies of their basements (note how I left out the painkilling/sleeping pill scenario as we'd already mentioned that was out of the question for our poor poetess).

On the 1st of July, Two-Thousand something, Chantelle Quaig stepped onto her porch after twilight to peek at the paltry display of fireworks set off by her ambitious next-door neighbours (that's us, by the way, the only ones close enough, as stated, to be able to tell her pathetic story, save her dearly departed mother who's been gone for half-a-year).

The funeral? No, there wasn't one. Her mother collected a pension, and she herself only ventured outside her property for groceries, toiletries (a fancy word for soap and the like), her medication (an off-kilter heartbeat we surmise eventually did her in), and an annual indulgence (mass for the dead at the monastery, for the soul of her husband, though the Church doesn't use that term – "indulgence" – anymore).

Being not overly patriotic, we haven't tried another fireworks display in the years since our last attempt. You suggest inviting the neighbour over to watch if we decide on a second show, though we're not sure if her phone's plugged in, being that no one answers (we only know she's still alive by the lights that blink both on and off behind the constantly closed curtains). On Instagram and Facebook? The very thought of her "social networking" brings a mutual chuckle.

I say I think I've heard her singing at one time, and that her kitchen window (or at least I believe that's where her kitchen lies) was open, by a good half-a-foot; perhaps lyrics to *Barber's Adagio* that she'd scribed as a poem. Her mother, a decade ago, boasted of her daughter's prowess at writing (when we bumped into her on the way to the store), sneaking out a sample behind her back, pinning one up at the valu-mart, on the community events bulletin board, among offers to clean your carpets, shingle your roof, have your taxes done without ever leaving your home.

Blank Notebooks

When you're a writer, people tend to give you blank notebooks as gifts. Sometimes, you also see one in a shop with an enticing cover, one with a picture of a painting by Matisse, for instance, or a Viennese café with old world artists discussing philosophy and love over cups of cappuccino with strips of cherry strudel by their side, and you buy these hardcover books of empty, lined pages and then realize, after the euphoric moment of purchase has passed, that you've sentenced yourself to filling it with poetry or prose whether you want to or not.

There's nothing more demoralizing than having an entire row of virgin journals on the shelf, accentuating your failure to do what you'd promised yourself and/or others in your usual boastful manner. Sometimes, to lessen the sting of their spotting, you scatter them about your abode – one in the dresser, for example, and another under the bathroom sink, where it may garner dampness and mould, making it unworthy to write in.

And that's when your conniving hits its stride, the excuse you've been looking for to avoid telling your immediate circle of individuals that you've had writer's block or have spent too much time on the sofa watching reality television or were just too lazy

to get the job started never mind done; that all the caffeine in the universe couldn't stain the pages with ink; that you were secretly hoping that termites would infest your place and that they were hungry for paper and bookbinder's glue and you could show everyone the tattered red ribbon they left behind, that it was placed near the end of your magnum opus, the great dystopian novel where the world runs out of trees because madness gripped the poet and he was unable to stop his scribbling even when pens were smashed to bits by the masses and he grew sickly and pale from frantically jotting things down with his cut finger and what remained of his blood.

Captain Fish Face and the Rusty, Saltwater Tank

I'd planned to write of the fish in the aquarium but by the time I got back to my apartment, I couldn't remember the kinds of fish I'd seen – just the colours and the way they aimlessly swam in their clear glass cages.

I was only at the aquarium because I didn't have anything else to undertake – well, I did or could have been more productive with my hours but never chose to and writing about it is as much a waste as the idleness of staring at fish through a pane of glass.

It was at a store, by the way, not a zoo of ocean animals and yet I treat it as so – I have no fish or turtles or sponges and the like of my own and hence have no need to ever set foot in that place that sells all of the aforementioned plus the accessories that accompany their upkeep. Of course, my not being a legitimate shopper is by no means limited to the undersea specimens on display – I do the same when looking at puppies, lizards, hamsters, and even cats (I'm a fervent lover of cats despite the fact I'm currently not in the market for one). And let's not get into furniture or sports cars on the lot.

What a waste of a salesperson's time and energy I must be. "Can I help you?" – of course you can't, dummy, I'm just another of those annoying humans

coming to gawk at the non-humans being peddled in your store. Now “peddled” may sound harsh and perhaps it is, but the fact that these establishments make money on the purchase of fellow living beings smacks of exploitation and thus I can’t paint these outlets as mere victims of my misuse of minutes given me by the heartbeat’s continual thumping, the daily spinning of the Earth (now *there* are some fancy lines I could use in a poem, but alas, they’re squandered on this rather meaningless tale).

It’s easy to be righteous and selective about where I choose to be a sluggard. I don’t watch the animals in the circus or the zoo or some pseudo safari-land fenced up and sanitized for mass consumption. I’m too “left-wing” for that. And of rodeos, well, it just goes without saying ...

Hypocrisy is a stranger beast than anything seen in a cage. It infiltrates our smug creeds and the way we splash our neighbours with disdain. If character is what you are in the dark, then it’s best to head up north when it’s “the land of the midnight sun” – *exactly where* to flee to when the planet’s revolution ‘round our star puts an end to all of that, well, I’ll consult with my geographer friend and scribe the results in another dramatic, edge-of-your-seat kind of story.

But lest my scribbling degenerate into some parody of pontificating, I'll digress and somehow try to conjure something about the fins and gills of the fish, the way their tails swished aside little dots of food or waste or whatever those specks in the water were; or what it must be like to have the eyes of those supposedly "superior" gaping at your every move, your every nibble and every personal moment you'd rather have unseen. Something about the old analogy of space aliens coming to whisk us off to their world where we're treated in the same way that we've behaved toward our fellow mammals and those a little "lower" on the food chain – namely, the birds, reptiles, and fish (the latter of which I still haven't said enough about even though they were to be the whole purpose of this exercise).

But enough. Even sermons are best left to Sundays (or whenever your holy day of the week is) or to those private thoughts where you think it's God speaking to you after years of protracted silence. And what would the Creator say of the fish? That they're better off in translucent boxes than in the oceans we've mucked up with garbage and spewing oil? Well, don't worry, I'll stop myself there lest another holier-than-somebody moment hatches from its incubating egg. Even a blatherer must heed the inner call to desist with typing and go squander more of the daylight.

Oh, and the colours I had started to write about but never got around to – a brilliant blue with a hue of violet, an orange burning like an aged, far-off sun, and yellow the tone of those dandelions I told myself I'd pull from the grass one of these days when I don't have anything better to do with my time.

Columbia, 33 1/3

Yesterday I bought a record, the kind that's made from vinyl, this one being the old-fashioned, more durable variety, the no-longer-in-use 10-inch size, and though I don't really know how old it is, it's old, much older than I am, and looks like it hasn't been played in half-a-century.

It's the *Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Opus 58*, by Chopin, played on the piano by Malcuzyński, who, like Madonna or Prince of the '80s, is a one-name wonder, this time the surname, I assume, being paramount, with the given one nowhere to be found; and though I know who Fredrik Chopin was, I have no idea who the hell Malcuzyński is, only that he's really good, and probably really dead.

But this isn't about the pianist or the composer, or the piano which never gets enough credit for the emotions it inspires, or even about the record though it claims, as most of them did way back when, that it's "non-breakable" (though I've no plans to put it to the test), and that it has a "silent surface" – which it may have had when it was new, but today, as I listen to it for the first time, it has more than its fair share of muffled scratches, which, yes, makes it all the more endearing.

What I'm thinking of instead of all this, is how often this record was played, in the past, and by whom: if it was an old music professor filling his room with beautiful notes, as opposed to the rasps of his own breathing (that always amplify in loneliness), or maybe a '50s schoolgirl who rebelled against rock 'n' roll, was a misfit who dwelt in libraries but had a smile I would have swooned for, or maybe both – the girl picking up the record at a used record shop, long after the professor had died, with no loved one to pass it on down to, both of them connected through the grooves that may have given them some solace on a Saturday night, when their peers were out there dancing, or under a flowered bed sheet somewhere having the kind of sex that Chopin may have alluded to in the finale, where Malcuzyński's fingers-pounding-keys speak of a *climax* of another kind, that only the fortunate know.

A Conspiracy Theorist Challenges His Fuck Buddy to Another Round of “Name That Tune”

You and I are legally drunk and maybe one of us thought the other sober or at least faking intoxication, and when you said that Bilderberg had died of asphyxiation, I questioned your sanity and had the right to do that, not that you could challenge any supposition offered to the contrary and if my bicycle helmet is worn indoors, what is that to you?

Make pearls in your hands out of socks. I'll scrunch them into balls and we'll paint them with liquid paper, larger and softer than life but far less cruel to the clams and what's left of our environment.

When Kyoto was denied, you predicted rainfall in Nairobi streets, said sea urchins would simply cab-it downtown. I countered with a scenario of my own accord, how jackhammers would be used in a Tchaikovsky suite and bassoons to build bridges in New York. The Port Authority prophesied that the Freedom Tower would stand, as a shell at least and Silverstein's no longer pissed. It's funny that his 99-year lease isn't weighted down by lawyers suing architects for fraud.

My fingernails are stained with the scent of lemon. You told me not to peel them, merely slice

and let the drops fill your cup. I should have listened but went my own shit-for-brains way, drinking the seeds along with the brine. When you see me next, I'll be on street corners doing jitterbugs with the cement men on Greenwich – they have nothing better to do since 1,776 feet of steel is all but done and its siblings are only fraternal.

Show me a field at one with its green. Leave the rocks where they are and don't let the dog stop and piss along its borders. If you lift a twig from an ant hill, offer peanuts as recompense. I heard it's the oil they want. Watch them, the next time they invade your cupboards. Isn't that an army toiling diligently, raising discarded crumbs upon their backs, marching single-file across your floor like Yankee soldiers on Methadone, tuned to their leader's speech and his solo on slide guitar?

It's Dylan you're tapping your foot to. Not Thomas, our wasted poet of yesteryear, but Zimmerman, before he found and lost the Messiah, singing lay lady lay across my big brass bed.

Random Chance

— *for Charles Darwin*

I get this craving sometimes for M&Ms and Super Variety's only a half-block away since I spotted the ad in the daily that I almost never read and moved to the \$720-a-month 12th-floor highrise which means I take the elevator a lot except on the day of my last craving when it was out of order and I had to take the stairs which caused me to show up at Super's 2 ½ minutes later than I should've but it was OK 'cause I'm always in-and-out in 20 seconds and because I bumped into this girl just going in to cash her lotto ticket which was as exciting as her life ever got even though she told me she's 3 months pregnant from a guy who skipped town and I thought that was a crazy thing to tell someone you've just met right off the bat and I said sorry for bumping into her and I play the lotto too but never win and maybe that's why I never get any dates so that's when she said it was my lucky day since she'd take me out for coffee with the 10 bucks she won and I told her I go to Dixie's except in this case she deserved the Bistro and that it would be my treat because of the way I liked her greenish eyes and I usually don't give those kind of compliments anymore since my high school days and that was the usual bullshit line to get a movie date and since then I don't look women in the eyes except for the moment I met this girl Rebecca and when she told me her name I got this pseudo-psychic feeling she was the woman

I'd marry and it helped that she drove a '79 Beetle which beat my crummy bus pass but I still made it to the Bistro ahead of her the next day and drank 3 cups of cappuccino by myself since she didn't show and I cursed my luck with women till I grabbed that crappy rag the next morning to catch up on the ball scores only to see Rebecca's photo next to a story on a freak car crash only a few lousy blocks from the Bistro which I might've heard if not for the music they played too loud and now a beautiful woman with an unborn baby who said I was sweet is dead and I'm no psychic and god how I hate M&Ms.

En Route to the Commonplace

I take the same route to work in my car every day. That in itself is not interesting, nor *where* I work since those are just two of the mundane things that don't make up poems or stories, unless they are boring ones that no one wants to read except the author who must have been *really* bored to write it.

What *does* matter is that I pass the same set of cars each morning going in the opposite direction, all of us locked in this routine that's needed in order to pay our various bills.

Again, none of this will fascinate, although it's sad that we can't all get together for a drink sometime on our day off, though since we only see one another as the brevity of a blur that's unlikely to happen, no one knowing anyone else's name, or even where they're specifically headed.

What might be of interest, though, is that one of the drivers and myself, a month from now, doing the same dull drive-to-the-office as we've done for several years perhaps, will, inexplicably, collide head-on – she, whose face I'll see close-up in that second before the slamming, a young woman of about 30, and myself, still single and ever hopeful of meeting such a person, to lurch forward from the impact,

heads banging onto glass perhaps if the air bag doesn't do its thing, or maybe the crash will be so serious that it will not matter, nor whose fault it is should we both be found dead behind our crumpled steering wheels and accordion-ized vehicles; or maybe if we're lucky, it will just be a fender-bender, neither of us accidentally stepping on the gas pedal instead of the brake, and the damage will be light, we'll take each other's phone number for insurance purposes, or maybe, if she's single too, as an excuse to call for coffee, or a cup of tea and conversation, to see whose job is more tedious, both of us wondering how we could have gone so many years without at least waving as we passed along opposite yellow lines.

Then again, if it *is* something more tragic, we may find ourselves neighbours at the cemetery just a few blocks away, her plot near a trio of pines, myself not far from the fountain, buried on the same day, an hour or two apart to allow the processions to do their duty without getting in each other's way.

Well, for now, whatever the outcome, before fate or a deity decides, we'll continue to navigate the morning rush, never giving heed to what the other is like, what colour of car we're each driving, or if either of us believe in God and true love,

just that the traffic is so annoyingly heavy, the potholes have yet to be filled, and that one of these days she or I will be swerving in order to dodge one, at that impromptu instant that says one of us has finally had enough.

The Extras

The people at the back of the restaurant, whom I seldom give attention to, are busy gabbing away, as are the others out-of-earshot; and this scene, with clusters of white-clothed tables, with non-descript individuals whom I know nothing about, nor feel led to care, reminds me of all the dining segments in film, where the spotlight instead is on the stars, their mannerisms, facial reactions, every scripted, rehearsed word that exits out of their open mouths (in between the bites and chews of food); and while most will focus on this, as is the intent of every director, I find myself reminded of the times that I rebel, turn my attention upon the ones who are in-and-out of focus:

the extras, the ones cheaply hired to fill all the spots in an eatery, where the character leads are rounding out their depth, fleshing out the story, their feelings and the like; but back to the underlings paid a pittance, who at least get a meal out of it all, complimentary, as part of the mammoth budget, perhaps not the filet mignon that the leads are gradually consuming, but something edible nonetheless; and I wonder what they're talking about, in the fuzzy corners where no microphones are attuned, except to pick up the buzz, the clink of glass and cutlery, to make the restaurant seem busy, popular;

and I'm curious about what they converse, since none of it is actually recorded, since it's only the lips that are moving with the indistinguishable natter of sound;

maybe they're gossiping about the stars, who hold hands as mandated in the take, or bitching about the producer or the assistant wardrobe director, bemoaning that their time to shine has yet to come, resigned to the fact that it may never, or perhaps pretending that the lens is focused on them, wondering what clever dialogue they can come up with and that it'll somehow sneak its way onto the movie's final print,

or maybe one of them is in love, with the fellow extra they've been seated with, and is confessing their feelings right now, and *I love you* is being uttered, then drowned, by the drone of anonymous din, ignored by the cast and the crew; that we'll never come to know the drama that *really* unfolded, from the ones forever un-credited; that they have to prove to their family and friends that they're truly in the film, perhaps with a begged-for still, a photo zoomed in, at a thousand percent – glossy, black-and-white, with a generous border for signing.

One Tough Giant

When it comes to getting groceries, I'm a fan of things staying relatively unchanged. I like my cookies in the same aisle as I've always found them, the potatoes beside the onions, and the cereal across from coffee. And I like packaging to stay as it is, with the logos as they were when I was a child, and the original names intact.

I want the scripted *K* that's a little weird to announce the Kellogg's line. The face of Uncle Ben to sit atop my fancy rice. And maybe it's one of those archaic stereotypes (that trumpets the African-American as a wonderful cook) but I'm afraid I'll go along – Aunt Jemima on my pancakes, please, and ditto for the smiling chef who's on my Cream of Wheat. I mean, would I still buy the damn thing, spend the extra time stirring its sandy texture into milk (which is the *creamy* version, by the way, much more rich than mixing with mere water) if some Caucasian guy's was the approved visage to oversee my morning warmth? Forget it. Let the PC police look elsewhere, for breakfast's my damned religion.

I'm just as stiff and stubborn when it comes to lunch and dinners. I want Mama Bravo to be hefty and Italian. Little Cook to be diminutive and Chinese.

Snacks, too, are out-of-bounds for change. The Sun-Maid Raisin girl must be blushing, brunette and fair. The Planters Man still peanut-shaped

and pretentious with his monocle. Give him a single contact lens and he'll be out of a job, I swear.

One has to realize that even a logo alteration of any kind is a change that's too traumatic, might tear society asunder. If Nestl  dropped the long "e" accentuation, wouldn't we all assume they're into cozy hugs and snuggles? Wouldn't we swarm their corporate offices, arms outstretched, awaiting blankets and some cuddles? They'd never finish their work, and powdered milk would never be made, a loss to mothers everywhere (notice how I've carefully avoided mentioning any corporate controversies, like the legal plundering of spring water in Ontario, for example).

There's no race-card when it comes to the jolly Green Giant. I mean, he could be no one. Really. But give him props for colour-coordination. Matching toga-like thing and slippers. As green as the Incredible Hulk. Not as buff, perhaps, but no string-bean nonetheless. And there he stands, as he has for so many years, watching over his fields better than any scarecrow can.

His physique's been stamped on the corner of the company's produce cans forever. Nothing's changed in that regard. But I do remember when their line of frozen veggies became my choice for year-round

legumes. There he stood, on a bag of frosted peas, his neck wrapped in a heavy, bright-red scarf. Even the mighty Giant needed to keep warm when the temperature dipped below zero (though his arms and legs were still bare. Silly man). And that made me feel less like a wuss whenever I complained about the harsh, Canadian winters.

“The *G-G-Giant’s* wearing a s-s-scarf,” I’d say, to the neighbour who sneered at mine – orange and mauve and muffling my words that stammered in the biting wind.

Well, all of a sudden he got macho. Not my neighbour, but the Giant. I was aghast, speechless when I saw him, haughtier than ever before, in the grocer’s freezer, standing scarf-less amid the corn. And the beans and Brussels sprouts.

There must be some mistake, I finally gasped, inspecting the packages to see if they were some foreign imitation that made it past security, like those fake TVs and digicams that pretend they’re “Mitsubishi.” Nope. Genuine Canadian Green fucking Giant. Thinking he can out-piss the Incredible Hulk.

I tend to think *the Hulk* would wear a toque or at least some mitts, if some produce company adopted him as their mascot, being that he’s solely American

and all, not accustomed to our colder climate. Maybe someday I'll toss a comic book into the depth of the frozen squash. See if his shirtless frame shivers. His purple pants recede. His strongman scowl softens. Hoping some passer-by will take pity, steam some veggies for dinner that night, eat them beside the fire, leave not a single morsel untouched, destined for the icebox.

Hey DJ!

Andy's commercial-free set was one of his best: each song flowed seamlessly into the next – from the fade-out to an upswelling lead-in that begged for one of those intro talkovers that all the hotshot DJs used – listeners thinking they simply had perfect timing – not knowing the computer showed exactly when the lyrics kicked in so the whole exercise reminded Andy of a juiced-up ballplayer hitting a hundred home-runs in a single season.

Andy hadn't seen a ball game in years – in fact, he'd done nothing outside his condo suite aside from his radio gig. He was the mid-morning guy – getting the chance to sleep in as opposed to waking before dawn for the morning drive that started at 5 and went to 9 AM. Now, there was only a computer-operated playlist spit out at breakfast time on a loop – causing innumerable times for Andy to hear “My Sharona” by The Knack, a classic hit, albeit, but by now had sickened him. And the station's Program Director, whom he hadn't seen in over 6 months, putting The Captain and Tennille's “Muskrat Love” (arguably the worst pop song in music history) on high rotation no doubt played a role in the station's dramatically decreased ratings. Of course, Andy hadn't read the latest BBM Reports (for none had been mailed to WZRA for half-a-year let alone e-mailed), but judging from the lack of phone calls received – *always* from the same snarky listener –

and the fact that no new ads had been produced and inserted in the designated spots between music sets only solidified his suspicions. And who, these days, would want to listen to a station that no longer broadcast daily news?

Andy was fully aware that in this form of media, cost-cutting was a sobering reality, but WZRA not providing even the latest headlines and sports scores was an obvious affront to his city's airwaves. In fact, Andy had taken to opening a window (despite the heated signage that warned against doing so), sticking his head out, looking to the western horizon, and formulating his own weather forecast. *Really*, how much would it have cost to hire a part-time meteorologist, replacing Cheryl, the previous one who abruptly stopped showing up for work? Come to think of it, Andy thought the whole *station* would soon be automated. *His* was the last live show by a live host that wasn't some repeated, syndicated program that hadn't had a new episode since last March (it was now September) or the dreaded, aforementioned loop of cheesy songs with only occasional intermittent vintage rockers that had fortunately aged well. In fact, the station was always deserted now whenever he entered (through the side door) and then when he left for his home which was an easy 4-block walk. And although the

maintenance person, whom Andy never seemed to run into anymore, kept the building fairly tidy (tables and chairs always in their same place and arranged in the way they'd been left the previous day), there was nonetheless a thickening layer of dust upon all the shelves as well as the digital board, the CD players, and the last remaining vinyl record-player that actually worked. And it was a good thing that Andy cleaned up after himself in the bathroom as it seemed that no one else ever set foot inside to clean it.

Andy thought to discuss the station's gradual decline with Edward Phipps, the station manager, but rumours, dating back to last winter, had him slated for transfer to KNSC (a country station on the other side of the state) so he simply surmised that Phipps was gone and whomever had replaced him (without so much as an introductory letter) may have been working from a centralized office of the corporation that owned WZRA, KNSC, and a number of other outlets specializing in everything from talk to hip-hop. Not that Andy ever listened to anything other than his own station (wanting to support it even in his personal free time – something that not all DJs did); and without cable TV and a laptop at home on the fritz and messages to tech support being unreturned, Andy had gotten used to using his allotted hours of leisure on the quiet pleasures of

reading fantasy novels, cooking on his portable stove that was hooked to a generator (much less costly considering the paltry wages that radio personalities were paid – much to the surprise of people to whom he used to reveal the lowly dollar amounts to), and of course, listening to WZRA and the stuff he'd grown comfortable hearing again and again (such as the midnight broadcast of Orson Wells' "War of the Worlds" and the questionably slotted "Live from the Grand Ole' Opry" – no doubt something borrowed from KNSC at the suggestion of Phipps though he had only programmed a week's worth of episodes that by now was getting tiresome to hear over and over – even though it had aided Andy in falling asleep on his sofa-bed).

But back to the original point of discussion, the set, the one highlighted by Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone," the Stones themselves following up with "Gimme Shelter" (which harkened to the infamous 1969 Altamont fiasco) and concluded with Barry McGuire's "Eve of Destruction" – a terribly out-of-date anthem that was totally pointless to listen to. For war was no more, Andy thought, chuckling as he listened to the urgency of McGuire's raspy lyrics. Of course, personal wars, between individuals who might disagree on something, would likely continue for some time (as exemplified by Andy's bothersome caller who no doubt was behind the sudden flash of the

on-air phone which Andy instinctively picked up), but nation vs. nation? What was there to fight about? It had been 6 months of the greatest peace he'd ever known, with no reports of shootings, bombings, or the sound of fighter jets overhead.

"Andy here!" was the usual greeting given to a caller-in; the name sometimes pronounced "Awndy" whenever the DJ felt like a pretentious fuck dealing with some hoi polloi.

The predictable sound of panting hit Andy's ear, followed by the telegraphed sigh and swallow.

Yes. Of course. Him again. Mr. "I don't have a life so I call radio stations and harass the DJ."

The voice sounded like the love-child of Leonard Cohen and Tom Waits: "Same old shit ..." (Perhaps the two-syllable nature of Andy's name required too much of the caller's cerebral abilities, hence the absence of greeting given him.) "Give Peace a Chance. John. Yoko (ok, two syllables there). Play it for fuck's sake." Then the click of receiver, dial tone, imagined chortling somewhere in the hillsides of the city.

He would have played it, *anything* really, if the caller had been polite. Or mixed up his requests a little.

Nope – same song, same artist, same DJ called. And Andy resented that. Could not “Mr. Get-a-life” find some *other* station to annoy? Maybe become enamoured with Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the USA” and phone KNSC and serve it up with a little drawl? But no country music whatsoever on WZRA – even if old man Phipps *himself* called in for Marty Robbins or Dolly Parton. Such a scenario was highly unlikely. The buzzard probably didn’t even *listen* to his own stations. As out-of-touch as a man-in-charge could be, Andy had always thought.

Anyway, enough about this station’s troubles for today. Andy signed off with The Clash, “London Calling,” though it never did (in either English or Canadian form since internet streaming hadn’t been working for, you might have correctly guessed, half-a-fucking year). And with his usual “enjoy the rest of your day” pleasantries, Andy released the multi-houred stack of tired pre-programming that followed with the press of a single button, and in minutes he was out of the on-air studio, through the hallway, past the vacant reception desk in the front lobby, and out the main door (to vary his routine a bit) which greeted visitors – if any – with a life-size, laminated poster of Andy LeDuc with his mouth to the mic and his hand holding an indistinguishable 45 RPM record in his left hand (it may have been left to

guess so as to avoid any hint of label favouritism or rumour of “payola”).

Yes, the kind of publicity which he used to see plastered on the side of city buses, ones he used to run for whenever his car was in the shop, ones he no longer needed to flag down and catch, being that he was a mere four blocks away; one such bus which sat this very moment, *derelict*, along the crumbled curbside of a sheltered stop – the glass of both blasted out, fragments still unswept like everything else: the bombed-out cathedral across from WZRA, the office tower reduced to rubble barely 5 stories tall now (a loss of 73 floors), and the stream of cindered cars, skeletal remains, and burnt-to-a-crisp brownstones that would greet Andy every step of his walk back toward the fissured shell of his condo with its en suite bath and skylight kitchenette.

Covenants

The socialists are gonna kill me. This isn't literal, or it might be, it depends on how much I've had in ratio of Tequila to Twitter, of Instagramming crosses and Bible paper and red-slashing their hammer-and-sickle icon I refuse to march behind when protesting the bulldozing of sweat lodges and animal traps I don't really like anyway — only because I can't stand humidity while the metal-mouthed, teeth-clenched hanger-on of furry limb (that would flee to liberty if it only could) is innately cruel, but then my Indigenous brothers need to survive too and who am I to Monday-sermon them to the point of un-friending and mute? And the traps aren't made like that anyway, you say.

Point taken and Unist'ot'en is where my spirit would stand if I had one which Hitchens would scream is nonsense if he were alive and would his ghost admit he was wrong all along?

I shoved the sacred tobacco in my glove when an Anishinabek elder offered it to me on a cold-as-fuck afternoon and the tea I just had failed to do its trick. It was his idea and I'm ever one to acquiesce. The sensation wasn't as grating as expected — much less than the Ashes of Wednesday that kick off Lent and I cussed each and every day after I boasted I'd give up the booze. Even the Rector regretted his promise.

But I digress – the Soviet emblem was nowhere to be seen and I admire the strength of beauty on the majestic, Mohawk standard. Never a mascot. Ever.

Self-flagellants of Dutch descent say *fearless Joseph? Misunderstood*. The Pierogi was undercooked and Stalin's chef, a Bourgeoisie. If your ravioli-in-a-can can't Italian, can Crimea stay Khrushchev's gift? "Holodomor is an American Lie" but Ukrainians aren't Jews so I can't accuse you of anything. White-on-white isn't racism and bigotry's a pun on words.

I tapped along the way to your exhibit, on Dundas, 'cause "innovation" is how it works and the King is just a block around the bender. You say it was meant for *Pride*, that the mofo had misgendered you, that the poets are giving you a second chance even if they barely glance. Look at them, at the open mic, how they're crafty in their beer. My granddad too wore plaid but his beard was bottom-trimmed. He should've gone electric. The sons of Cossacks killed him, y'know.

You told me once you read my zines, how collage was just a puzzle high on glue. The horse-race went to *Paradigm*, mine rabbit-slept, gun-shy.

You're surprised I've grown my hair, that I didn't exchange the Fedora for a line of MAGA hats –

and how could I, when the orange dotard's Kimchi is P'yöngyang-laced? Elton John was forced to cringe when *Rocket Man* was named. Bernie Sanders shared the credit but Taupin wrote the tune – feel the burn of your mistaken.

I'll await your wokened grovel, the "I'm listening" alit by torch. Apologies unaccepted by the flash of mob appeal. And we thought *Frankenstein* had it bad. The flower-girl, *tossed* in the pond head-first, deleted like a circumcision's precision cut. The director's lovechild howls to this day. Even Solomon would've cupped his ears. Not David's son but Ginsberg's muse. It only goes to show that the straitjacket was unnecessary. A hairshirt would've done.

But back to the woman birthed by adultery (according to the Enquirer, '74): she'll get a letter from the Queen if she's Canadian, at her centenary. For both of them. The border guards are Sergeant Schulz and the Wall is just a rubble of Lego blocks, hidden in the shags of golden carpet, like landmines in Vietnam – even the caravans of Juan Guaidó won't risk it just-in-socks.

I'll give them my shoes, barely scuffed and the boy who blacks them up is as blonde as the village-damned. Look into his eyes — closer. They're not aglow, you see. Nor Necronomicon demonic. He's

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only reflecting sunlight that shines on the bad and on the good, and I wanted to Jesus-quote to show He's *still* the Son of God, at least in my humble summation of Truth.

You frothed and foamed at the jaw when you read my untimely interview; my slandering of academia, that it's garish bafflegab, their verse, *spouted* by Commie demagogues in cliques. We cold-shouldered each other for days.

When I creaped your profile on AssFace, yours was just as phoney as the rest – quinoa/greens aplenty, your obligatory bikini pics from Cuba (unless you were in Bayfield all the while and had *filtered* the beach to hell), *regurgitating* gifs and memes I've seen a thousand times already. And. putting. a. period. after. every. fucking. word. does. not. make. it. profound.

You asked me if I checked you out, your steamy summer selfies. I say that sex with someone you hate is the most thrilling of all, that the feigning of love is a reality deeper than the secret spaces of your body – that no, I didn't look, or if I did, I didn't imagine us together. We'd tear at each other's throats and then pass them off as hickeys. I have breasts of my own – what need have I of yours? But that's from all the *faggot* jokes I was forced to hear in school. whenever I whipped off my top, I wondered if it was true.

I'm in love with my wife. As enticing as you think you are, I'd never take the bait. But never say never (again): we're Bonded by lust and loathing. When Belle & Sebastian called it right, that you want to be left alone with Marx & Engels for a while, I should've paused before sharing the Gospel – John's, Matthew's, or from your favourite, Mao Tse-Tung (though he'd never confess the Christ). See, even atheists bow the knee to some supposed incarnation. When they placed him in a state of State, they might have brushed his teeth at least. That's why he never smiled, I tell you. When we think we're all the same, then who is beautiful?

**A New Believer Justifies His Presence
at *la Brasserie du Frontenac***

Your conversion wasn't the cause of conversation, I was never in the mood to debate, to analyze atrocities by *the People of the Book*.

Let us say our alphabet is in *need* of subtle change, an extra letter, an inverted B, that something needs to be done with every O that looks like zero.

You *swear* to fight obscenity wearing slippers made of wool, announce that sheep are standing with you, that the Lamb of God's the star, you're only *receiving* belated thank-yous for His Sermon on the Mount.

When you'd said you were ungodly, an atheist *without* doubt, they christened you in Paris as the *éminence grise*, teaching doctrine without a crown or chic degree.

They said you *spoke* with blatant madness: "Devour soup in such a way that makes no *use* of silver spoons, use a straw in front of mother, a *fork* if all the patrons are filthy rich."

Adding it's not to cause offense, to appear so peasant-class, but that the consommé is thicker than it looks, and if someone has a sense of Eastern balance, a single *drop* will never spill upon the floor.

Tell the diners that to tip is condescending, that the waiter has no need for alms or mites, that C.S. Lewis is still among them, his refutations heard in every *one* of your awkward slurps, that Screwtape was your father, you're disinherited from his will, that the crucifix you clutch isn't a blanket or a crutch but a revision of letter *t*, since preceding *s* is so reviled, the one that we all blame for being banished from belief, and remaking never ridding us of sin, a serpent's soul to lurk *elsewhere*, in the innocence of *A* and all beginnings.

The Penitent or Cannon Foster's Dissonance Revolution

Note the reasons that you offer under our light bulb's scrutiny, the excuses that you conjure, that you're no *murderer* of children or a pouncing, heartless thief.

So you defend yourself with parables, make analogies, apologist. It falls apart in seconds with your motives and intent, the clumsiness contrived like a banana peel of old or a simple clash of chefs spilling sushi in desserts, fish that swam just hours before fresh-baked in flans and crumbles. If I'm around the kitchen door, sponging hinges with vinaigrette, know I've summoned witches from their trance, to fashion peace with warring factions, keep *dissent* from mutating, beating the bird flu at killing us all.

Once, when my wisdom teeth were pulled, I knew what seeing death was all about. They counted *back* from 10 to 1, anesthetics kicking in by the time they got to four – and I felt nothing, saw nothing, knew that *nothing* awaited souls all ripe and brimming with redemption.

It's much too late for demons to regain their cloudy place, their faces still contorted by the fall. If they trade-in all their pitchforks, would their fingers pluck on harps? The done is done already and the street too set in rock to allow for U-turns on the

road. There's a patrolman who is watching with his buzzer on the horn, waiting to silence the changed-of-mind with a reckless driving ticket.

Remember Eastwood's comeback in the raucous *Unforgiven*. Who predicted Oscars for his old-man gait and voice? Even his nameless, faceless stuntman is eating donuts by the pool.

They'll sculpt your many failings on the sunny estuary, next to madmen selling tickets to the ball. If you can, come in costume as Rodin, say Camille is on her way, seducing the *Sheriff* who pulled her over, driving fifteen over fifty with curdled cognac in her cup – her bewitching breasts exposed to offer payment for the fines.

And at last when no one's watching, when they're bowing their heads in prayer, smash their graven image with a hammer from the shed. Tell them it was an accident, an earthquake, an Act of God as clemency; to reconcile, easier the second time around, supporting substitution and Word becoming Flesh, dispensing lambs that bleat and bleed *seventy, seventy, seven times seventy*.

Dr. Lerner's Study Notes or The Treatise of Cameron King

You called it a manifesto – but I was able to see right through it, a declaration of your intent to make our bitter world much better – but how could all this be with only *you* left at the helm?

You rage against society with all the right clichés: Blast the banks and corporate whores and the cops are on the take. Now tell us something new, please will you? Or must we hear it all again before you turn and go away: TV is god and can't be trusted; God is dead, and Bush, a fraud, and Bin Laden got his money from the Church and CIA. The New York Times, a pack of lies and CNN the same and tell us something new now, would you?

Smoking gives you cancer, and *every* quarter pounder, chicken wing, a crime against the earth and the blood of all the cows and pigs accuse us in the name of Job and will you *tell us* something new?

Let Leviathan now speak and Jehovah entertain, this test of sorts has done away with all complacency, a roll of weed the harbinger of something simply greater, the clowns who frown at circus time are ripe with social change. Look, the Apple tree knows better and Microsoft's the prophet of the hip and modern day. We need no sport to thrill the crowd, the Bible tells us so!

Let us dance. Let us dance to wind-whipped leaves and cherry pies that drop from clouds and pour from skies with kites. Nagasaki was the über 2nd coming, the number 2 banana and it burns you to the bone to see the one you love score *last* and out of first. Let the children cut the ribbon and the mayor ring out for cake: “Hear ye! Hear ye! It’s the orange juice on time that keeps the sentences in place, the seeds and pulp both censored, the peel without a trace.”

“We’ve only just begun,” you hum in altered states, “to shine ...”

Where is our nearest fantasy? Your Waldenesque Utopia that follows Krishna’s flute? Your 8-ball in the corner won the trophy and the game but the ladies didn’t care and that festers in your mind.

“I’m a Communist! I’m a Stalinist! I’m a soldier in the ranks of Kim Jong-un!” You’re an empty, blind-guide Pharisee, and Howard Stern, your maître d’.

Your scribbles have just been published by the Black House Book of War and you think that Knopf and Norton will be drooling *jealously*.

“I’ll tell you something new, what you’ve never heard before!” I liked your parroting of truth a whole lot better, only because deep down inside the rest of

us thought you sane, knew that you were right and though the words you echoed had damned us all, we wish we hadn't chuckled.

You swing from vines and look for Jane, or Eve when stars come out, the firmament now clear of pies and Yahweh's court, adjourned. Job has found his daughters and the Devil, welcomed back – in the parlour, near the kitchen, reading E.A. Poe by candlelight with Jesus by his side. All is well with love and hate and killing is no more.

See, you found a way to tell us, to share your new-found faith; the oracle of guidance wrapped around your scrawny neck: in the guise of quartz and ruby stone, the eye that sees past life and death and shouts that you're our Adam – that lets you sit 'neath orchard trees and taste the fruit that falls, without temptation, without the curse, its sugar juice runs out your lips and no one calls you mad.

The After Solstice

Written on the 21st day of June 2004
(the longest day of the year)

On the first day of Summer, in 2004, after the Solstice, on the longest day of the year, and by longest, I don't mean the worst or most boring, although the day is far from over and a lot can still happen in a day but I'm talking instead about the *science* of the day, the longest day, how the sun's rays hit the earth and all that kind of stuff.

The sunrise was earlier today than any other day, not of all time, I just mean on June 21st it rose about a minute before it did on the previous morning (and yes, I know that it's *us*, the planet, that moves, the sun's not actually rising and falling though it too moves, like everything, in some kind of orbit or circle within the galaxy, and that too moves but enough about that as this isn't an astronomy lesson, just some story I'm writing on the longest day of the year on an old typewriter that still works – see? Well I guess you can't since I'm retyping it on my computer but I've at least chosen a font that somewhat resembles the one the *Royal* manual had been stuck with).

Since I wasn't really thinking of catching the earliest sunrise of the year, the curtains had been shut and I stayed in bed and listened to the radio (my dear friend whom I chum around with does a show on the local college station, as do I on a different morning of the week and we just basically play music that very few people like except us it seems and I think about her a lot but that's not what this is about) and I only preface this account with such to explain the title which may or may not have anything to do with the story that follows:

You see, Timothy, maybe I'll call him Tim later on, started the day with coffee, writing, and his Belle & Sebastian records (just like I am doing right now, on the longest day of the year, after the Solstice, but from here on in it's all fiction, okay?). Sometimes he plays Leonard Cohen, Simon & Garfunkel, The Beatles, or The Cannanes (an Australian indie pop band I also like but I'll end the obvious similarities there, as Timothy is younger and much better looking and writes about abstract art in his friend's gritty street 'zine plus some poetry here and there like me but I think it's best if I drop the self-references and speak of Timothy, Joanna, and

Rupert from now till the end which isn't far off since this is just a short story after all).

His morning routine having ended for this day, the longest of the year which was the first full day of summer too, summer having started at 8:57 PM the night before when the sun's rays hit some spot on the Tropic of Cancer or Capricorn or the equator but who cares anyway, Timothy was off to his café jaunt to meet up with Rupert who published the little magazine I mentioned earlier. Rupert preferred Timothy's *poems* to his critique of local artists and their exhibitions at Studio Noir, a shithole of a gallery run by the Artists' Collective of Maple Street.

Do all the artists in this city live on fucking Maple Street, Timothy had thought when he'd first met Rupert four years ago at the library, the *old* library that later was torn down by city politicians, who, like all politicians, are self-serving motherfuckers. The latest critique wasn't flattering, and Joanna Lamoureux, the painter in question (who also did photography and whose black & white exhibit Timothy shit all over in issue 13 of Rupert Hedge's 'zine which reminds me that I neglected to tell you

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Timothy's last name which is Libbitz but he spells it Libbits so it will look less eastern European or Jewish or whatever the hell his problem is or thinks it is) would be majorly pissed off when she'd show up, or at least after Timothy told her what he thought of her pretentious pseudo-modernist brush strokes and gaudy use of colour. He wouldn't be so blunt or use that descript when conveying his opinion to her in person at the café though it was too late for the print version of the critique since Rupert put out the Summer issue of his 'zine last Thursday, the 17th of June even though it wasn't summer until today, the 21st of June, the longest day of the year, though Summer really began on the 20th, at 8:57 PM, at least that's what the guy on the Weather Network channel said. Oh, and in case you cared, Rupert's 'zine is called "Sidewalk Graffiti" which isn't too original and rather pedestrian in the sense of its commonality. No pun intended. Okay, maybe a little.

The café itself is named "The Prague on Wanabi" after "Wanabi Street" on which it's found, near the corner of Maple. "The Prague Wannabe," Timothy called it, full of hipsters,

scenesters, poets, philosophers, old remnants of Beatniks plus the obligatory hippie or two sometimes sporting a faded blue-on-orange “Jefferson Airplane” t-shirt ripped on the collar. And berets and goatees a-plenty, plus oversized glasses (both eye wear and for drinks) as well as long, lacy skirts for many of the girls.

Rupert had already been there for an hour or so, sipping on a latte like a fucking cliché. Timothy went against the grain, ordering hot apple cider from the cute blonde girl, 16 years old tops. Timothy was 27 and should have known better than to check her out while she was giving him his change, a rather pervy thing to do, many would surely say.

“What do the polls say today?” Timothy asked while seating himself down across from Rupert at a window table for 4. Joanna would be coming soon but the fourth chair would likely stay vacant unless another friend or acquaintance showed up unexpectedly which was known to happen at coffee houses.

Rupert cared far more about politics than Timothy and followed the Canadian federal

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election closely, having watched the French and English leaders' debates a week earlier and commenting on it on the editor's page of "Sidewalk Graffiti."

"Conservative Minority. Yay. Stephen Fucking Harper, Prime Minister."

"Paul Fucking Martin is no better," Timothy shot back, wincing at both the over-sweetness and the hotness of his drink. "I mean, the dude's nothing but a Bay Street liar."

"A suit's a suit," Rupert replied, his political leanings far more left than even the NDP. "Even the Greens have a suit for a leader. Give me Marx and Engels and a cabin in the woods."

"Marx and Engels" was the name of Timothy's favourite Belle & Sebastian song, about a boy who wants to talk to a girl at a laundromat. Rupert wasn't referring to the song, but the communist philosophers. Rupert was a goddamn communist. Good for him. But he knew Joanna would be coming soon and wanted to prep Timothy before she arrived.

“She’s pissed, man. You could’ve gone easier on her ... “

“Joanna Lamoureaux is a sham,” Timothy snarled, quoting Stuart Murdoch from “It could have been a brilliant career,” B&S track one, album three. “Just because you think she’s hot doesn’t mean I’ll sing her praise in your ‘zine. If you don’t like the truth, find another fucking writer for your shitty rag.”

This is why Timothy had few friends. The truth, as *he* saw it, at any and all costs. Spoken (or written) abrasively, with little care of consequence. Well, one such “friend” just showed up, fake half-smile to Rupert, no acknowledgement to Mr. Libbits.

“Why don’t you order something first?” Rupert suggested as Joanna had already grasped the top of the chair on which she was to sit. And so she did, cheese Danish, dark roast with extra cream, further talk of the Green Party vs. the NDP vs. the Corporate World taking precedence – for it was half-past noon on the longest day of the year, the first day of Summer. And birds

were being melodious outside, somewhere in the trees, within earshot. The Prague on Wanabi's windows were open, as they should be, on the twenty-first of June, Two-Thousand and Four, at half-past noon.

Timothy was semi-surprised that Joanna had even recognized him. Rupert had known her for over a year – Timothy only seeing her *once* at the “gala opening” of her photo exhibit at Studio Noir. She hadn't been around when he scanned her paintings; something about her working Tim Horton's from 10 till 2 that day and he was at the gallery at 1 (see, I said I'd use “Tim” later in the story). Cryin' shame.

“You must be a miserable bastard, Libbits,” Joanna said, finally addressing the reason for arranging the café meeting. “The BIG critic. You're a fucking little shit.”

Timothy, having prepared his rebuttals all morning, wasn't so easily taken aback. Yet. “If you can't take the heat, get – “

“What the hell do *you* know about art?!” Joanna shouted rhetorically. “‘Cause you write

your crappy suicide love poems and then print them up yourself since no one would ever *publish* your shit?!"

Okay, *that* hurt a bit. Rupert, meanwhile, wanted no part of it.

"Where'r *you* going?" Timothy's question stabbed at Rupert's ears and returned unanswered, except for a hasty couple of mumbled words.

"Gotta go." Rupert picked up his newspaper, really the *café's* paper but he was stealing it because he was a selfish prick (for a communist) and wanted to scan job listings at home, away from impending conflict and seeing his friend and a girl he was hot for duke it out in public. "See you, Joanna," and to Timothy, "I'll print that poem in the next issue."

In six to eight seconds, he was gone, out to hear the sparrows sing on the way to his shabby apartment three blocks west, toward the dirty sludge river that cut through the city like a dull, twisted steak knife. Rare, not medium (referring

to the *meat*, of course), smelling of death and consumption. At least that's how Rupert Hedges described it in one of his Lenninist rants. I didn't say it was a good metaphor.

In the seconds that followed, Joanna played two scenarios in her mind: continue her rip into all things Libbits or sit in the now-awkward silence while deciding whether to stay or go. Timothy made it easy for her to choose.

"So much for me being 'Mr. Self-Published.'"

The sarcastic retort was resounding. "Wowwww ... 'Sidewalk Graffiti' printed by your *friend*, who I didn't get the chance to thank for accepting your 'review' in the first place. That should land you the Griffin."

Ignoring the mockery, Timothy took a slurp from his now *tepid* apple cider and instead focused attention on his poem, and Joanna's dig at Rupert, but in reverse order. "Don't blame Hedges. If he would have passed, he would have been breaking his 'free speech' motto,

which not *all* commies have. And he's printing the poem because it's *good*, and the litmags can kiss my ass. Pretentious bastards. And sorry I was so mean with my review."

The last part was unintended. It just slipped out, a tinge of conscience, attraction, hope that this red-haired, brown-eyed girl in jeans and skinny tee would like his poem. Timothy had it folded in his pocket, the poem, the one he thought Joanna should read so she'd know what "higher art" was all about and it was rather conceited of him to think that way.

Joanna eyed his every move. "I don't want to read your lousy poem – " She was going to say more but was cut off.

"Then *I'll* read it," Timothy said and he *did*, right there, across from a near-stranger in a café half-filled with wannabes and phony intellectuals, who said they loved jazz but didn't, who brought Dante works here just to be seen reading something smart though their hearts and minds belonged to Maury Povich; over the voices of the birds outside and the crash of cups

and saucers inside and the mindless conversations he felt were taking place around him, and across, no, *beside* really, this seething young artist who if she stayed to listen, could take the role of critic, thrust a lance to the heart in revenge when it was over, easily remembering where she was and what she was doing on the longest day of the year.

The delivery was emotive yet still inept, several stammers and an unnecessary pause or two throughout, and thus ends this unorthodox preface to what really is only a piece of poetry, lines of verse adroitly buried under pages of pointless prose:

“‘The After Solstice’ by Timothy Libbitts

You’ve said I despise
the artist, not the art
and to that let’s plead
no contest.

There are better things
to write about, on this day,
the one they say is the
longest day of the year;

we can speak of the extra
minute of sun we all drink in,
if the clouds be gone
and the skies permit,
but if not, let's talk of
nearing the half-way point
of the year, another year
I said I'd be loved, not only
love, that she would write
of me, as I do of her,
that you'd see the cynical
front was only that,
shielding the tenderness
and eyes that water much
too easily.

When my communist friend
quotes grisly headlines
in the paper: air strikes
on civilians,
mothers and infants
cut down in err ...
but make no mistake,
those things and all the others –
the theft of land,
the starving of the millions,

the we-don't-care
coffee cup conversations
we loathe yet birth in our own
right and way,
The Pledge of Allegiance,
The Prayer to our God above,
The Singing at the Flag,
The United States of Earth,
not just America or the Americas,
but the continents *all*,
deserts encroaching
like tumours, wheat and rice
yielding to sand and stone
and all things we call *sacred*
only stand as mirrors and we
our fingers pointing.

Forgive my diatribe,
I'm not to talk of such things.
Play your harp and let me
sing of pleasant soliloquy.
A lily, a daisy,
a maple tree or two.
Don't tell us about
the hurt and pain on
Main or Maple Street –

the beggars we all pass
by and judge as Lord and
King on blinding,
brilliant thrones.

And today, our suns
shine louder than ever
before, on first Summer's
light, the morning
after Solstice, on the
longest day of the longest
year of the longest lives
on the Earth.

I'll live until a hundred,
you say with satisfaction.
That was a hundred
three-hundred and
sixty-fives you had
to make things better
than they are and look
behind and know
it's all so very, very worse.

Forgive again, I lost
my place in the petals

and leaves, flowers
and trees, the rocks
by the river
and the walks
with the family
dog.

I will not speak again,
on the coldness of our
eyes and the love we say
we have. Let the
words speak clearer
than thoughts. Hold me
until the winter comes,
when snow covers grass
as a blanket on the heart,
when we have excuse
for indecision;
when they're out of our
sight and out of our ears
and Christmas lights
keep us safe and warm
on the shortest, darkest
day of the year."

Joanna didn't say a word after Timothy finished. There was *nothing* to say: no retaliatory barbs to toss, no shoe-on-the-other-foot evaluation or mental notes to later scribe and give to Rupert Hedges for publication in "Sidewalk Graffiti." Just "Goodbye, Timothy" and a half-smile as she up and left, one that wasn't feigned, falling just short of admiration.

And yes, that was enough for Timothy Libbits, sorry, Libbitz, who'd settle into his chair, alone at the table, pondering the possible ordering of a latte and fighting the realization that he was *home* and did not abhor the ones around him after all: neither beatnik nor hipster nor hippie nor balding yuppie with briefcase. His anger was spent, and each writer, great or small, needs to know when to put the pen down for the day, the longest day of the year, and go and watch the sunset, still some hours away, with a beloved.

As for me, the story is done. It was just a poem, really; the story surrounding its reciting simply slices of bread 'round the Reuben. No other purpose, was there?

Words don't always make things better and neither do good wishes. They're something to be considered and kept for safe keeping. Writers like myself and the ones I make up merely want to be remembered – yes *while* we're still alive but more so after we are gone, lilies on our graves and maybe a rose or two to let us know we didn't waste our time or squander daylight hours the sun above us gave.

*This is all I could offer the world. Another time,
another place, another circumstance and it may have
been more.*

– AG

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